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Source: *Social and Economic Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 3, NEW CURRENTS IN CARIBBEAN THOUGHT (SEPTEMBER 1994), pp. 105-134

Published by: [Sir Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and Economic Studies](#), [University of the West Indies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27865977>

Accessed: 14/06/2014 01:35

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REVISIONIST ONTOLOGIES: THEORIZING WHITE SUPREMACY¹

Charles W. Mills*

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AND RACE

The black philosopher (a small category)² or the black Caribbean philosopher (an even smaller one) in North American institutions faces a problematic and paradoxical situation. On the one hand, he or she (usually he) comes out of a history rich in issues and ideologies that would seem to cry out for philosophical investigation: race, culture, identity, existential crisis, Pan-Africanism, Garveyism, *negritude*, Rastafari. On the other hand, if he has been educated within the dominant Anglo-American analytic school, he has been trained in a tradition for which these issues are invisible.³ Race has long been extensively discussed within political science, anthropology and sociology, of course, and in the last decade or so, with the challenge to the core curriculum, there has been an astonishing boom within cultural studies of the analysis of white-supremacist and colonial discourses, involving representations of nonwhites and the Third World. But philosophy, the "queen of the sciences" in one famous formulation, is for the most part regally detached from this rainbowed multiculturalist bustle, gaze serenely fixed on the metaphysical distances, apparently contemplating what one writer tellingly, if maliciously, describes as "the unbearable whiteness of being" (Romano, 1993). Even

*Support for writing this paper was provided by the Institute for the Humanities, University of Illinois at Chicago.

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- 1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 19th annual conference of the Caribbean Studies Association in Merida, Yucatan, Mexico (May 1994).
 - 2 The October 1993 figures from the American Philosophical Association Committee on the Status of Blacks in Philosophy show that black philosophers constitute less than one percent of the North American total.
 - 3 A special triple issue of *The Philosophical Forum* (Pittman, 1992-3) looks at some contemporary issues in developing African-American Philosophy. For my own reflections on the matter, see Mills (1994a).

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political philosophy, whose this-worldliness would seem to make it most congenial to discussions of the significance of race, has little to say on the subject. Most historical anthologies restrict their contents to the traditional European figures, and an otherwise excellent recent introduction to *Contemporary Political Philosophy* by one of the leading young scholars in the field is unfortunately typical in having no systematic analysis at all of race, though feminist theory gets a whole chapter (Kymlicka, 1990).

So the result, especially for nonwhite Third Worlders teaching at white First World philosophy departments like myself, may often be an uncomfortable kind of dichotomization both in one's teaching and one's research projects. One teaches regular philosophy courses—and then, as I have done, one *also* teaches a course in "Caribbean Studies," or in "African-American Philosophy". One publishes on "respectable" subjects in established mainstream philosophy journals—and then one *also* pursues one's black or Third World research interests, presented at sessions such as these, and destined for eventual publication in Caribbean journals and edited collections. There may even be, as in my own case, and in the case of an African friend of mine, a conscious adoption of a two-track policy, in which (at least for the first few years out of graduate school) "black" publications are carefully paired with "white" publications (1:1, or, for the more cautious, 1:2 or even 1:3). In effect, it's as if one always has a wary eye out for potential First World evaluators and referees, trying to assuage their concerns in advance: "I may seem to be doing some weird stuff on the side, but really it's OK, because, as you can see, I *am* able to get into the journals you know on the subjects you recognize."

The question is, though: why should this be necessary? Why shouldn't these black/Caribbean/Third World issues (see, for example, LaGuerre [1982]) be incorporable into a history of modern political philosophy course on Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Mill, Marx, or a contemporary thematic course that looks at contractarianism and communitarianism, welfare liberalism and laissez-faire libertarianism, at Rawls, Nozick, Walzer, Sandel? Why should there be this ghettoization of the Third World, as if it were really on a separate planet, rather than being very much a part of one world interconnected with and foundationally shaped by the very region studied by First World theory? What exactly is it about the way political philosophy has developed that encourages this kind of intellectual segregation?

I think the problem in part involves a kind of exclusionary theoretical dynamic, in that the presuppositions of the world of mainstream theory offer no ready point of ingress, no conceptual entree, for the issues of race and culture that typically preoccupy much of Third World theory. (The issues of Third World poverty and economic underdevelopment, on the other hand, can be handled—if the will exists—within the framework of discussions of international justice, through an expansion of moral concern beyond the boundaries of the First World nation-state.) The assumptions are so different that one may seem to be caught between two heterogeneous intellectual universes, with no ready way of translating the concerns of the one across the boundaries of the other. And where racism in European thought is mentioned, the discussion is usually limited to the writings of marginal theorists like Gobineau; the biases in the views of the central figures in the pantheon are not examined.

So typically what one gets (insofar as any effort is made at all) is an attempt to piggyback the problem of race on to the body of respectable theory. For example, one looks at racism as a **violation** of the ideals of liberal individualist ideology, or one tries to **explain** race and racism within a Marxist paradigm. But race is still really an afterthought in such deployments, a category theoretically residual. That is, one is starting from a pre-existing conceptual framework—an overall characterization of the system (“constitutionalist liberal democracy”, “capitalism”), a set of large-scale and small-scale theories about how this system works, or should work, and an array of corresponding concepts—and then trying to articulate race to this framework.

Unsurprisingly, then, there is usually something unsatisfactory about these efforts. I want to propose an alternative approach as an innovation in political philosophy. Suppose instead we try something different, and place race at the centre-stage rather than at the wings of our theory. The idea here would be to follow in philosophy the example of those feminists of the 1970s once characterized as “radical” (as against “liberal” or “Marxist”) (Jaggar, 1983), who—themselves inspired by the U.S. black liberation movement—decided to put gender at the centre of their theorizing, and appropriated the term “patriarchy,” correspondingly, to describe a system of male domination. So rather than starting from

some other theory and then trying to smuggle in gender, one begins from the fact of gender subordination itself.

There are, of course, crucial disanalogies which need to be noted. For one thing, gender as a system of power has been seen by some as practically universal, and dates back, if not to the origins of the species, at least to an age thousands of years before our own time, whereas white domination is clearly a product of the modern period. Moreover, many radical feminists appeal to varieties of biological determinism to explain patriarchy, and regard it as the source of all other oppressions, claims I would certainly not make for race. But with these and other caveats registered, it would still seem that one could fruitfully consider race itself as a political system. So we would treat this as a particular mode of domination, with its special norms for allocating benefits and burdens, rights and duties, its own ideology, and an internal logic at least semi-autonomous, influencing law, culture, and consciousness.

We could use the term "white supremacy" to conceptualize this system. The term is currently employed in a much more restricted sense, for example to describe the regimes of the American Old South and apartheid South Africa (Fredrickson, 1981). But what I am suggesting is a more latitudinarian conception, encompassing *de facto* as well as *de jure* white privilege, that would refer more broadly to the European domination of the planet for the past several hundred years that has left us with the racialized distributions of economic, political and cultural power that we have today. We could call this: global white supremacy (Kiernan, 1969; Said, 1993). And the idea would then be to locate both oppositional black/Third World theory and establishment white/First World theory in the conceptual space brought into being by recognizing this expanded political universe. From this perspective, I suggest, we would then be able to appreciate that black and Third World theory have characteristically been concerned to map the whole of this system, while mainstream theory has pre-eminently been focussed on a very limited section of it, with the rest of the world either ignored or squeezed awkwardly into the categories developed for this restricted mapping.

GLOBAL WHITE SUPREMACY AS A POLITICAL SYSTEM:
REPLIES TO OBJECTIONS

Now this notion may seem immediately problematic, so I want to go through some of the possible objections that might be raised to it.

- (i) First, there might be the friendly amendment that we already have a politico-economic term with the same approximate referent, in the form, say, of "imperialism" or "colonial capitalism".

(a) But in the first place, of course, this isn't true, because these terms aren't usually taken to apply (apart from upholders of variants of the "internal colonialism" thesis) to the internal politics of the white settler states like the U.S. and Australia, or the Iberian colonies in the Americas, which became independent at a relatively early stage. Moreover, colonial capitalism is by definition restricted to the period of formal colonial rule, whereas, as indicated, I want to argue that in a weaker sense white supremacy continues to exist into the post-colonial period today.

(b) In the second place, and perhaps more importantly, these terms are, for my purposes, not sufficiently focussed on the racial dimension of European domination. Both in the standard liberal and the standard Marxist analyses of imperialism there has been an economism which fails to do theoretical justice to race, with race being seen as an irrelevancy to the ontology of the liberal individual, or the class membership of workers and capitalists. But the racial nature of the system is precisely what we want to highlight. As Gordon Lewis has pointed out in his magisterial study of Caribbean ideologies: "The Caribbean society, in sum, was not only a mercantilist-based capitalist society. It was also a racist society. Racial insult was added to economic injury. That explains why a theory of economic exploitation alone—of which there is a substantial literature by Caribbean authors of the Marxist persuasion—is insufficient to explain the totality of Caribbean exploitation.... It was two-dimensional. And the racial exploitation left behind it deep psychic wounds quite different in character and quality from those derived from economic-class exploitation" (Gordon Lewis, 1983, pp. 6-7).

- (ii) Still in the spirit of a friendly amendment, it might then be argued that, in that case, "racism" or "white racism" is the term appropriate to the conceptual task.

(a) My response here is, first of all, that after decades of divergent use and sometimes abuse, the term is now so fuzzy, with such a semantic penumbra of unwelcome associations surrounding it, that unless a formal definition is given, no clear denotation can be readily attached to it.

(b) Secondly, one of the crucial ambiguities in its usage is precisely that between racism as a complex of ideas, values and attitudes, and racism as an institutionalized politico-economic structure for which the ideas are an ideological accompaniment. If the term "white racism" were consistently employed in the latter sense, then we might not need another locution, but this is not at all the case. On the contrary, it is usually the ideational sense which is meant. And this has the theoretical disadvantage of making it possible for everybody to be "racist," in a Hobbesian scenario of equi-powerful atomic individuals with bad attitudes, thereby deflecting attention away from the massive power differentials actually obtaining in the real world between nonwhite individuals with bigoted ideas and institutionalized white power. "White supremacy" and "global white supremacy," on the other hand, have the semantic virtues of clearly signalling that one is referring to a **system**, a particular kind of polity, which is structured so as to advantage whites.

- (iii) A more hostile objection might be that to speak of "white supremacy" as a political system necessarily implies its complete autonomy, and explanatory independence from other variables. But I don't see why this follows. The origins of white racism as an elaborated complex of ideas (as against a spontaneous set of naive prejudices) continue to be debated by scholars, with various rival theories—ethnocentrism on a grand scale, religio-culturalist predispositions, the ideology of expansionist colonial capitalism, the rationalizations of psycho-sexual aversions, calculated rational-choice power politics—contending for eminence. We don't need to make a commitment as to the truth of any of these theories; rather, we can just be agnostic on the question, bracketing the issue, and leaving it open which explanation, or complementary set of explanations, turns out to be most adequate. All that is required is that, whatever the origins of racism and the politico-economic system of white supremacy, they are conceded to have attained at least a partial, relative autonomy, so that they are not immediately reducible to something else.

- (iv) Correspondingly, it is not being claimed that to speak of white supremacy as a political system implies that this exhausts the political universe. The idea is not that “white supremacy” must now **replace** previous political categorizations, but that it should **supplement** them. In other words, it is possible to have overlapping, interlocking, intersecting, systems of domination, and the argument is—in the same way that feminist theorists have convincingly shown that, no matter what their other differences, existing polities have **also** been patriarchies—so the globally dominant political regimes in the West for the past few hundred years have **also** been white-supremacist states. Utilizing the concept of “white supremacy” focusses our attention on the dimension of racial oppression in these systems; it is not being claimed that this is the **only** dimension. In some contexts, the focus on race will be illuminating, while in other contexts it will not be. So the idea is to correct the characteristic methodological omissions of the past and present, not to prescribe an exclusivist theoretical attention just to this one aspect of the polity.
- (v) Nor does use of the term imply that white supremacy is either synchronically uniform or diachronically static. There will be different forms of white supremacy in different parts of the world—native expropriation and enclosure on reservations here, slavery and colonial rule there, formal segregation and anti-miscegenation laws in one place, mixing and intermarriage in another. The privileging of whites is compatible with a wide variety of political and institutional structures: it is this privileging that is the key element. Similarly, the depiction of nonwhites within the system can vary tremendously—from exterminable savage to colonial ward to second-class citizen—without this threatening the crucial premise of nonwhite inferiority.

Moreover, white supremacy evolves over time, in part precisely because of the other systems to which it is articulated, in part because of the political struggles against it of nonwhites themselves. So in a detailed treatment, one would need to develop a periodization of different forms, with one obvious line of temporal demarcation being that between the epoch of **formal** white supremacy (paradigmatically represented by the legality of European colonialism and African slavery), and the present epoch of *de facto* white supremacy (the aftermath of slavery and decolonization, with formal juridical equality guaranteed for whites and nonwhites). The basic point, then, is that it would be a mistake to identify one

particular form of white supremacy (e.g. slavery, juridical segregation) with white supremacy as a family of types, and then argue from the non-existence of this form that white supremacy no longer exists. The changing nature of the system implies that different racial organizations of labour, dominant cultural representations, and evolving legal standings, are to be expected.

- (vi) This would also pre-empt the objection that if global white supremacy ever existed, it is now clearly long past, since—especially with the recent demise of apartheid in South Africa—we live in a world where yellows, browns, and blacks rule their own countries, and nonwhites in First World “white” nations are no longer formally subjugated. The answers would be:

(a) First, even if global white supremacy were completely a thing of the past, it would still be a political system of historical interest.

(b) Secondly, even if there were complete good faith on the part of whites about the desirability of abolishing this system, the comparative historic recency of its formal demise (slavery in the Americas ended only a century to a century-and-a-half ago, while global decolonization and U.S. desegregation are essentially postwar phenomena) would mean that it would continue to affect the new world for a long time to come simply through institutional momentum and unconscious attitudinal lag.

(c) Thirdly, of course, it is clearly politically naive to argue from the mere fact of the abolition of *de jure* racial subordination to the reality of genuine *de facto* equalization, and to conclusions about the genuine commitment of all or most whites to relinquish their historic racial privileges. An objective look at the world today shows that independent Third World nations are part of a global economy dominated by white capital and white international lending institutions, that the planet as a whole is dominated by the cultural products of the white West, that within many First World nations there has been a resurgence of racism, including biologically determinist ideas once thought to have been definitively discredited with the collapse of Nazi Germany, and that in general the dark-skinned races of the world, particularly blacks and Native Peoples, continue to be at or near the bottom of the socio-economic ladder in both metropolitan and Third World polities.

So a case can easily be made that white supremacy continues to exist in a different form, no longer backed by law, but now maintained through inherited patterns of discrimination, exclusionary racial bonding, differential white power deriving from consolidated economic privilege, etc.⁴ Thus Kimberle Crenshaw emphasizes (with specific reference to the U.S., though I would claim the point is more generally valid) the importance of distinguishing between “the mere rejection of white supremacy as a normative vision” and “a societal commitment to the eradication of the substantive conditions of Black subordination”: “[A] society once expressly organized around white supremacist principles does not cease to be a white supremacist society simply by formally rejecting those principles. The society remains white supremacist in its maintenance of the actual distribution of goods and resources, status, and prestige.” (Crenshaw, 1988, p. 1336). Indeed in the U.S., the disappointment of the hopes raised for genuine black inclusion in the polity by the formal victories over “Jim Crow” segregation in the 1950s and 1960s has led some black Americans to begin to speak pessimistically of “the permanence of racism” (Bell, 1992).

(vii) A different kind of objection might be not to the principle of the notion of race as a political system, but to the details, i.e. to the “white” in “global white supremacy.” The racial rules in the U.S. basically dichotomize the polity according to the “one drop” principle by which any black descent makes you black. But elsewhere, particularly in our own region of the Caribbean and Central and South America, there is a more complicated ladder, with many rungs rather than just two. Moreover, in the post-colonial period, there is at least a partial transition in which “browns” come to rule rather than just whites. I think the response here would have to be as follows.

(a) The color and shade hierarchies in these countries (e.g. the former slave states of the West) have themselves been established by global white supremacy, in that ascent up the ladder strongly correlates with a greater degree of white ancestry and a greater degree of assimilation to European

4 For U.S. data, see, for example, Hacker (1992). For a discussion of the Jamaican situation, see Carl Stone, “Race and Economic Power in Jamaica,” in Lewis and Bryan (1988).

culture, so that these systems are essentially derivative, and would still need to be related to it.

(b) Though in many of these countries "browns" govern, economic power often continues to be controlled by a white corporate elite, whose presence and interests constrain the dimensions of the political space in which browns can operate, thus delimiting the real possibilities for independent action and the democratizing of racial access to socio-economic opportunities.

(c) In addition, as mentioned, the larger world—the global economy, the international financial institutions—is dominated by First World powers which (except for Japan) are themselves white, and thus linked by various political, economic, and cultural ties to local whites, thus differentially privileging them.

(viii) Another objection might be to the imagined theoretical pre-suppositions of such a notion. The invocation of "race" as explanatory in politics has historically been most strongly associated with discourses (19th and 20th century imperialism; Nazism) explicitly predicated on biologically determinist assumptions (Social Darwinism; *Rassenwissenschaft*). These bodies of thought were, of course, officially (though never completely or thoroughly) discredited with the collapse of the Third Reich and postwar decolonization. The widespread employment of a racialized discourse in oppositional popular black and Third World theory may then be assimilated by hostile critics to racist theorizing of this kind, even if the charge is sometimes softened by the prefatory "reverse racism" or "anti-racist racism".

But this pre-emptive rejection of "race" as a respectable theoretical category is illegitimate, because the dichotomization between a mainstream methodology (liberal or radical) that is largely insensitive to race, and a racial determinism with ludicrous pseudo-scientific assumptions (whites as evil "ice people" driven to dominate the planet), does not exhaust the actual alternatives. A growing body of literature is beginning to recognize both the **reality** (causal significance, theoretical centrality) and the **politicality** (socially-constructed nature) of race. It is not the case, in other words, that a focus on race, white supremacy, and corresponding "white" psychology necessarily commits one to racist assumptions about whites, though admittedly lay thought will not always make these distinctions. So although I said earlier that I wanted to

bracket and suspend the question of theoretical explanations for racism, I am at least theoretically committed to the extent of seeing race in **constructivist** rather than biologicistic terms.

For “whiteness” is not natural; rather, infants of a certain genealogy/phenotype growing up in a racist society have to **learn** to be white. Correspondingly, there have always been principled and morally praiseworthy whites—those sometimes termed “white renegades”—who have thrown off their socialization and challenged white supremacy, whether as imperialism, slavery, segregation, or apartheid, in the name of a colour-blind humanity. So these could be described as whites who have rejected “Whiteness.” The important point is, then, that—as “race men” have always appreciated—a racial perspective on society can provide insights to be found neither in a white liberalism nor a white Marxism, and, when suitably modified and reconstructed, such a perspective need not imply biological generalizations about whites, nor commit the obvious moral error of holding people responsible for something (genealogy/phenotype) they cannot help.

- (ix) A specifically left objection, correspondingly, might be that to see “race” as theoretically central really implies a return to a pre-Marxist conception of the social order, and ignores class.

(a) To begin with, of course, in the largely post-Communist world of the last decade of the 20th century, Marxism’s explanatory credentials are hardly unchallengeable. But in any case, as noted above, the conception of race presupposed is a constructivist one, which **does** leave open the possibility that a convincing historical materialist account of the creation of global white supremacy can be developed. Making race central doesn’t mean making race **foundational**; it just means taking seriously the idea of an at least partially-autonomous racial political system. (For those with left sympathies, the traditional explanatory route will be through the European Conquest, the imposition of regimes of super-exploitation on indigenous and imported populations, and the differential **motivation** and cultural/ideational **power** of local and metropolitan ruling classes to ensure that “race” crystallizes as an overriding social identity stabilizing the resultant system [Roediger, 1991; Allen, 1994].)

(b) Nor does the notion of white supremacy imply that there are no class differences within the white and nonwhite populations, or that **all** whites are materially better off than all

nonwhites. The implication is rather that whites are differentially privileged as a **group**, which is compatible with the existence of poor whites and rich nonwhites. It also leaves it open for the Marxist case to be made that, in the long term, white supremacy is of greater political and economic benefit to the white elite than the white working class, and that though by the baseline of existing white-supremacist capitalism, white workers are better off than nonwhites, they are poorer than they would be in a non-racial order. Since "white supremacy" is not being put forward as denoting a comprehensive political system, it does not, as earlier emphasized, preclude there being other systems of domination (class, gender, etc.).

- (x) Finally, it might be objected that the concept—"global white supremacy"—is pitched at a level of abstraction too high to be useful. But one has to differentiate appropriate realms of investigation. "Capitalism" as a concept has obviously been found useful by many generations of thinkers, both lay and academic, as a general way of categorizing a certain kind of politico-economic system with a core of characteristic traits, despite the fact that there are evidently vast differences between the capitalism of a century ago and the capitalism of today, or the capitalist systems of Japan, the United States and Jamaica. For detailed case-studies, one must, of course, descend empirically to the investigative level of the political scientist, the economist, the sociologist. But for the purposes outlined above—that of supplementing the conceptual apparatus of the political philosopher—this distance from empirical detail does not seem to me to be problematic. At this level, what one is concerned with is the general logic of the abstract system, the overarching commonalities of racial subordination between, say, colonial Kenya and independent Australia, slave Brazil and the postbellum United States, that warrant the subsumption of these radically different polities under a general category. "White supremacy" captures these usually-ignored racial realities, and it is on this basis that I would argue that it should take its rightful place in the official vocabulary of political theory along with other political abstractions like "absolutism," "democracy," "capitalism," "fascism," "patriarchy".

In conclusion, having considered all these objections, it should be noted that the great virtue of this account is that race is no longer residual, a concern to be awkwardly shoe-horned into the structure of a theory preoccupied with other realities, but

central, so that any comprehensive mapping of the polity must register this feature. And by virtue of the social-systemic rather than ideational focus, it directs our theoretical attention to the important thing, which is how racial membership privileges/disadvantages you **independently** of the particular ideas you happen to have. (In that qualified sense, race is “objective.” Even “white renegades” need to face the fact that, no matter what their racial politics, they will be privileged by their social classification.) The attitudinal and atomic-individualist focus of at least some varieties of liberalism reduces the issue to bigotry which needs to be purged through moral exhortation; the class-reductivist focus of at least some varieties of Marxism reduces the issue to the imposition of a variant of ruling-class ideology which needs to be purged through recognition of class identity. In neither case is there an adequate recognition of the fact that the system under scrutiny is **also** a racial one with its own dynamism and autonomy, its own peculiar social ontology.

Moreover, whereas Marxism’s claims about the intrinsically exploitative character of capitalism, and the viability and attractiveness of socialism as a solution, have always been—and are now more than ever—highly controversial, all good liberals should oppose racism. So if, as many would now argue, the events of the last decade have conclusively demonstrated that capitalism is the only feasible option for humanity, then what one wants is a capitalism that lives up to its advertising. Liberals as well as radicals should therefore enthusiastically **endorse**, rather than raising objections to, the analysis and exposure of global white supremacy as a political system, since this is clearly in contravention to the ideal of a colour-neutral, racially-accessible market society. The Marxist anti-capitalist project is currently of limited appeal, but in theory at least one would like to think that **all** people of good will would support the critique and ultimate elimination of white supremacy, including the whites privileged by it.

THE POLITICS OF PERSONHOOD

Let’s suppose, then, that this is accepted as a useful concept which needs to be taken account of by orthodox political philosophy. How would mainstream theory then have to be transformed to take race, i.e. global white supremacy, seriously in its conventional discourses? What would it mean for the standard terminol-

ogy, scenarios, frames of reference, characteristic terms, favourite preoccupations, of Western political philosophy? What new phenomena would come into theoretical view?; what old phenomena would have to be transformed?

Now obviously there are many ways to approach these questions, but the issue I am going to focus on, which I believe to be the key to many of the others, is the issue of **personhood**. As stated most eloquently in the writings of Kant, persons are rational self-directing entities whose rights must be respected, and who must be treated as ends-in-themselves rather than merely instrumentally (Kant, 1948). Kant here is the philosophical spokesman for the Enlightenment moral and political egalitarianism which ushers in the modern epoch. Thus in the bourgeois revolutions, American and French, which resonate around the world, it is classically stated that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." So by contrast with ancient and medieval hierarchies, the starting-point is the freedom and equality of all men (sic). (Feminist theorists, of course, have long since demonstrated that the "men" in these theories are indeed male rather than gender-neutral "persons". See, for example, Okin [1979] and Clark and Lange [1979]).⁵

The social contract tradition that dominates political theory over the period (1650-1800: Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant) begins from a social ontology of the equality of (those counted as) persons, and though contractarianism then disappears for the next century-and-a-half (to be surprisingly revived by John Rawls's 1971 *A Theory of Justice* [Rawls, 1971]), this equality is henceforth installed as the normative ground floor of the edifice of Western political philosophy. All humans within the scope of the theory are persons, and the preoccupations of First World theory then centre on different theories of justice, competing constitutional models, rival economic arrangements, etc. for this population.

5 In a more detailed treatment one would, of course, have to look at internal differentiations within the nonwhite population itself. My statement here is obviously just meant to be programmatic, drawing what I take to be the central line of conceptual demarcation.

What difference does taking race seriously intrude into this picture? Basically, it directs our attention to what is happening **beneath** the “normative ground floor,” in (so to speak) the moral/political basement. My argument is essentially that for most of Enlightenment First World political theory, what seems like a **neutral** starting-point, which begs no questions, is actually **already** normatively loaded, in that the population of “persons” has been overtly or covertly defined so as to really be coextensive with the white (male) population. They are the respectable occupants of the building. So in the period of *de jure* global white supremacy (European colonial rule, African slavery), the scope of European normative theories will usually extend just to Europeans at home and abroad. That is, there will be theories about the rights, liberties, privileges, etc. of “all men” which are really intended to apply only to “all white men,” nonwhites being in the moral basement which is covered by a **different** set of rules.

The present period of *de facto* global white supremacy is characterized by a more complicated normative arrangement, in which there is an **abstract/formal** extension of previously colour-coded principles to the nonwhite population, but genuine equality is pre-empted by, e.g., lack of enforcement mechanisms, failure to allocate the necessary resources for implementation of the law, evasion of juridical proscriptions by legal manoeuvrings,⁶ and the continuing consequences of those ethno-class concentrations of economic power which in a capitalist economy violate no law in the first place. Thus while such an extension is a real normative advance, by no means to be downplayed, it will not constitute a genuine challenge to white supremacy unless and until the means to correct for the effects of past racial subordination are included in the rewriting. And this will require, *inter alia*, a frontal recognition of the white-supremacist nature of the polity in its various manifestations.

To take Rawls as an example: even if (as he does) Rawls declares race to be morally irrelevant to personhood, knowledge of which is accordingly stripped from us by the veil of ignorance,

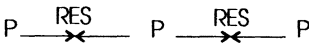
6 See, for example, Massey and Denton (1993), for an account of the mechanisms by which *de facto* U.S. segregation continues to be maintained a quarter-century after the 1968 passage of the Fair Housing Act.

this will not be sufficient in the real-life, non-ideal polity of the United States to redress past inequities (Rawls, 1971). Failure to pay theoretical attention to this history will then just reproduce past domination. In other words, one does not confront white supremacy by ignoring it, since this will just incorporate it, through silence, into the conceptual apparatus. One is then beginning from a starting-point which is **not** neutral, but biased in ways about which the theory is silent, thereby guaranteeing that these systemic inequities will not be addressed, and that the measures objectively necessary to achieve genuine equality will not become theoretically visible. (Cf. Okin on the illusory, merely “terminological” gender-neutrality of most contemporary political theory, such as Rawls’s, and the need to develop concepts sensitized to the specific situation of women in the non-ideal family, for example to reflect the ways in which women are made “vulnerable by marriage” [Okin, 1989, esp. chs. 1, 7].)

A more realistic starting-point, which takes white supremacy into account, would therefore not be the abstract egalitarian Kantian ontology (fig. 1[a]), but what I have called elsewhere the “dark ontology” of “**Herrenvolk** Kantianism” (Mills, 1994b). (The term is inspired by Pierre van den Berghe’s description of the white settler states like the U.S., Australia, South Africa, as “**Herrenvolk** democracies,” polities which are democratic for the master race, the **Herrenvolk**, but not the subordinate race[s] [Van den Berghe, 1967]). Here the political population is explicitly characterized as it actually is, i.e. as a two-tiered, morally partitioned population divided between white “persons” and nonwhite “sub-persons” (fig. 1[b]).

From this cognitively advantaged perspective—the view from the basement—First World political theory can then be seen for what it is, that is primarily the limited theorizing of the privileged “person” subset of the population about itself. For those in this tier, personhood is not in contention in any way; personhood is taken for **granted**, so that in the internal dialogue between members of this population, the real-life second tier can generally drop out of the picture, and it will seem to them as if the situation is as represented in fig. 1(a). Abstract raceless colourless persons—who are concrete, **raced, white persons**—will then, in their egalitarian moral/political theories, such as Kant’s, relate to one another with reciprocal **respect** as moral equals. Because of

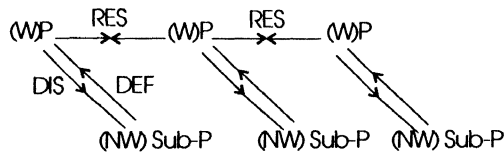
OFFICIAL KANTIANISM: IDEAL ENLIGHTENMENT ONTOLOGY



Population: Abstract individuals.
Raceless persons give each other mutual respect as individuals
Personhood and self-respect are taken for granted,
have no connection with race

(a)

HERRENVOLK KANTIANISM: ACTUAL DARK (UNACKNOWLEDGED)
ENLIGHTENMENT ONTOLOGY



Population: Raced individuals, white persons and non-white sub-persons.
White persons give each other mutual respect as whites, but give racial
disrespect to non-white sub-persons, who in turn are required to give
racial deference to whites.
For non-whites, personhood and self-respect have to be fought for, and
are intimately tied up with race.

(b)

Figure 1

the representation of this system in their own minds—because the basement second tier is usually presupposed as invisible—they will think of this respect and this personhood as disconnected from anything else but rationality; race, colour, history, culture, will generally play no role in the overt theory, not because they play no role overall—they are in fact crucial to the architecture of the two tiers—but because their commonality to the white population means they can be eliminated as a common factor.

We can now appreciate, then, why this conceptual terrain is so apparently inhospitable to the concerns of Third World theory. For if race is not even acknowledged to make a difference, how can these two discourses be located in the same universe? The way to bring them together, accordingly, is to point out the illusory character of abstract Kantianism, and to recognize the actual *Herrenvolk* moral theory appropriate for a white-supremacist polity, one in which the difference race makes is precisely to demarcate persons from sub-persons.⁷

Individuals are in fact raced, coloured, bearers of a certain history and culture, and this is what indicates their location in the racial polity. And if paradigmatically in the Kantian normative framework, persons are not to be treated merely instrumentally, as means to others' ends, then sub-persons (Native Americans, blacks) can be regarded as precisely those for whom such treatment is morally appropriate.

It should be noted that this has always been recognized by black and Third World theory: anti-slavery, anti-segregationist, anti-colonial. Thus in the Introduction to his classic *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon says bluntly: "At the risk of arousing the resentment of my colored brothers, I will say that the black is not a man" (Fanon, 1952, p. 8). And this is because, as he points out elsewhere, the colonial world is "a Manichean world," "a world cut in two," "divided into compartments ... inhabited by two different species," and "it is evident that what parcels out the

7 For example, Sebastian Clarke (drawing on Fanon) argues that in Jamaican rock steady, "the dancer could remain on his spot of earth, shake his shoulders, make pounding motions with his arms and hands (at an invisible enemy, an anonymous force), without recourse to or consciousness of a partner. The internal tension was demonstratively and explosively released." (Clarke, 1980, p. 81.)

world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species," on the one hand the "governing race," on the other inferior creatures to be described in "zoological terms" (Fanon, 1961, pp. 38-42).

Similarly, from the other side, a white Alabaman speaker addressing a northern audience in 1860 describes with admirable clarity the actual founding principles of the United States: "Your fathers and my fathers built this government on two ideas; the first is that the white race is the citizen and the master race, and the white man is the equal of every other white man. The second idea is that the Negro is the inferior race" (Fredrickson, 1981, p. 155). And this, of course, far from being an idiosyncratic perception, is accurately reflected in the 1857 *Dred Scott v. Sanford* U.S. Supreme Court decision that blacks were "considered as a subordinate and inferior class of beings, who had been subjected by the dominant race.... so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect."

So I am not making any claims to theoretical discovery here; what I am arguing for is the formal recognition of these realities within the framework of an orthodox theory that generally ignores them. Race has been a problematic "deviation" for both liberal individualist and Marxist class-centered mappings of this system, because they have both failed to take seriously the objective partitioning in the social ontology produced by global white supremacy.

Once this expanded moral topography has been acknowledged, and not evaded or defined out of existence, it immediately becomes obvious that the transactions in moral and political space are far more complicated, involving many other dimensions, than those sketched in the standard First World cartography. Focussing exclusively on the lateral person-to-person relations of the ideal Kantian population, mainstream theory misses the dense vertical network of the person-to-sub-person relations, and also elides the ways in which even the horizontal relations are structured by their positioning with respect to the latter. So there will be political struggles which are, if not invisible, at least not readily detectable by the lenses of orthodox theory's conceptual apparatus. Or if they are seen, the tendency will be to assimilate them to something else, missing their true significance; it will not be appreciated that they constitute struggles (affirmations/repudia-

tions) around the **Herrenvolk** ethic because the existence of this ethic is not formally acknowledged in mainstream philosophy to begin with.

Here, then, are some theses on the politics of personhood within the framework of white supremacy, in a **Herrenvolk** ethics:

- (i) Personhood and sub-personhood are reciprocally defined, and manifested on several different planes:

In ideal Kantianism (predicated on a population of white individuals), the person can be abstract, raceless, colourless. In **Herrenvolk** Kantianism, on the other hand, the criteria for being a person will necessarily have to be developed in contrast to the criteria for being a sub-person. So there will be a dynamic interrelation between the two. As Richard Drinnon observes about the early colonial settlements in the United States: "Indian-hating identified the dark others that white settlers were not and must not under any circumstances become" (Drinnon, 1980, pp. xvii-xviii). Moreover, where abstract Kantianism is focussed solely on rationality, **Herrenvolk** Kantianism will have a richer set of metrics of assessment—cognitive, moral, cultural, somatic—numerous axes along which one can measure up to, or fall short of, full personhood. The result, in part, will be that (white) persons will look to (nonwhite) sub-persons as an inverted mirror, a reflection of what they should not be, and (nonwhite) sub-persons who accept the **Herrenvolk** framework will in turn have (white) persons as their (unreachable) ideal, a norm by definition never to be achieved, but one which can at least be aspired to as far as possible.

- (ii) Sub-personhood has to be enforced, and racial deference from sub-persons maintained:

Because of the self-sustaining symmetry of ideal Kantianism, the system is inherently a stable one, since it rests on reciprocal relations between persons of acknowledged equal worth, involving a respect voluntarily given. **Herrenvolk** Kantianism, on the other hand, requires that a subset of the human population learn to regard themselves as "sub-persons," and as such not really human, not of equal worth. Thus the system will be potentially an unstable one, requiring subjugation and ideological conditioning to ensure its ongoing reproduction. Sub-persons are not born, but made, and the making is not a once-and-for-all event like slave-breaking or even an extended process of indoctrination like

colonial education, but an ongoing political operation involving routine daily transactions of various kinds.

Moreover, people's sense of self-worth will obviously be influenced by the peculiarities of this system. In the ideal Kantian community, self-respect is fortified by reciprocal symmetrical relations of respect from others who are our moral equals. In this **non-ideal** racially-hierarchical "community," on the other hand, the self-respect of those designated as full persons will be linked with moral relations on **two** levels, white peers and nonwhite inferiors. Not merely must one's fellow-persons respect one, but one must also be paid what could be termed **racial deference** from the sub-person population. Failure to receive this deference then becomes a threat to one's sense of self-worth, since self-worth has been defined hierarchically in relation to the class of inferior beings. So it will then be crucial to the reproduction of the system that the moral economy of deference is maintained, with a watchfulness for signs of insubordination in the sub-person population. By posture, body-language, manner, speech, and gaze, sub-persons need to be constantly demonstrating that they recognize and accept their subordinate position.

- (iii) The resistance to sub-personhood requires a struggle at all levels, including the carnal battlefield of the body:

Correspondingly, the **resistance** to this status will be an ongoing subterranean tension within the racial polity. The persons of mainstream philosophy, being ghostly disincorporate individuals, can take their personhood for granted. But this, as argued, is because they are really **white** persons conceptualized without reference to the nonwhite sub-person population. For sub-persons, on the other hand, personhood has to be fought for (against the opposition of the white population, who will have a vested material, psychic and ontological interest in continuing nonwhite sub-personhood). Sometimes this struggle will be overt; at other times circumstances will make it necessary for resistance to be clandestine, coded. But in all these white supremacist states, it will be a constant presence, a standing threat to the dark ontology of racial hierarchy.

Because of the multi-dimensionality of the stigmatization of nonwhites, this resistance will have to be of a corollary breadth: moral, epistemic, somatic. Morally, one has to learn the basic self-respect that can be casually assumed by white Kantian per-

sons, but whose attainment for sub-persons will require the repudiation of the official metaphysic. Epistemologically, a cognitive resistance to *Herrenvolk* theory will be necessary, the rejection of white mystification, the sometimes painful and halting development of faith in one's own ability to know the world, and the articulation of different categories, the recovery of vanished or denied histories, the embarking upon projects of racial "vindication." Somatically, since the physical body has itself become the vehicle of metaphysical status, since physiology has been taken to recapitulate ontology, resistance may also involve a physical transformation of the flesh, or of one's attitude towards it. The deviant standing of the flesh of the nonwhite body means that the body itself is experienced as a burden, as the lived weight of subordination. So one gets what could be called a "carnal alienation," more ontically central to one's being than any Marxist notion, since what is involved is not the estrangement of the worker from his product but the estrangement of the person from his own physical self. The sub-person will then not be at home in his/her own body, since this is the carnal sign of his/her sub-personhood, so that one will be haunted by corporeal spirits, the ghost of the white body. Resistance to sub-personhood will thus require an exorcism of this ghost, and a corresponding acceptance and celebration of one's own flesh.

REVISIONIST ONTOLOGIES

My claim is, then, that this model provides us with a generally useful trope for expanding and transforming traditional political philosophy, extending our conception of what is to count as political. If global white supremacy is conceptualized as a political system, then a wide variety of phenomena can now be illuminatingly seen as attempts respectively to enforce and to resist this system. In particular, once we recognize that "personhood" itself has been overtly or tacitly racially normed, we can appreciate that a central focus of the struggles of the peoples of the "New" World, particularly Native Americans and Africans, has always been the defiant assertion of their personhood, the repudiation and re-invention of the selves imposed by white supremacy (the white man's Negro, the white man's Indian) (Jordan, 1968; Berkhofer, Jr., 1978). One will then be able to see as political that "the mere act of rebellion required, on the part of the slave-person, the

capacity to purge himself of the white bias, and its accompanying slavish deference to everything that the white system stood for; to perceive himself, in his self-image, as equal, or even superior, to the white master-person" (Gordon Lewis, 1983, p. 225).

"Revisionist ontologies" can then be taken in one or both of two ways: the necessary formal recognition in political theory of the actual dark ontologies constructed by the *Herrenvolk*, the metaphysical infrastructure of global white supremacy, and/or the revisionist challenges to these ontologies by the subordinated population contemptuously categorized as sub-persons. As Rex Nettleford has pointed out about the Rastafari: "At the heart of his religious system is the notion of his own divinity and the first-person image of self. As if for emphasis the terms 'I-n-I' and 'I-man' are used as a constant reminder of the final transformation of a non-person (as the old slave society and the new Babylon would have it) into a **person**, as is defined by 'Jah Rastafari' and asserted by the Rastaman himself" (Nettleford, 1976, pp. xiv-xv). (And think, in this context, of the significance of the Jamaican creole term *smaddification*.)

Conceptualizing "personhood" as itself a battlefield, a terrain of political contestation, thereby enables us to locate and understand as "political" an array of phenomena not readily apprehensible as such either through liberal or Marxist prisms. Whatever their other differences, these theories are both predicated on taking personhood for **granted**. But in fact, from the time of the first European incursion into the Americas, Native Americans' personhood was in doubt, with the controversy over whether they were really human culminating in the great 1550-51 debate at Valladolid (Hanke, 1959), while throughout the period of African slavery, of course, abolitionists and anti-abolitionists continued to ask the question of whether blacks were really equal to whites. So the historical record is clear enough; I am not revealing anything that people don't know. The burden of my claim is that the **philosophical and political** significance of these well-known facts has not been sufficiently appreciated. What I am arguing for is an explicit reconceptualization of political philosophy that would enable us to situate these struggles appropriately, i.e. as defences and subversions of a political system of global white supremacy that is insufficiently, if at all, discussed within the body of theory

within which most of us have been trained and within which we continue to operate intellectually.

I want to conclude by indicating, necessarily somewhat schematically, some possible directions of research for political theorists.

- (i) **Herrenvolk History:** The black oppositional tradition in the Americas has always pointed out the significance of what has been called the “bleaching” or “whitewashing” of history. It would be worthwhile to take this as a theoretical object for political philosophy. Thousands of articles have been written in the Marxist tradition on so-called “bourgeois ideology,” and its influence on diverse fields of study. But what Third World political theorists need to start doing is self-consciously theorizing about what could be called “white settler ideology,” “Herrenvolk ideology,” and its influence both on historiography (Young, 1990) and on fictional representations of the European Conquest (“discovery,” “colonization,” “founding of a new world,” “the civilizing mission,” etc.).

It would be an interesting exercise, for example, to investigate and chart a history of “holocaust denial,” not the familiar neo-Nazi denial of the facts about the World War II mass murder of the Jews, but white scholarship’s depiction of the fate of Native Peoples, from the response to the original claims of Las Casas onwards through characterizations of the “Indian Wars” of the 18th and 19th centuries. David Stannard’s *American Holocaust* is an important revisionist work, timed for the Columbian quincentenary, that draws on recent demographic research which has dramatically increased estimates of the pre-Conquest population of the Americas, so that—with figures ranging possibly as high as 100 million victims—this would be “far and away, the most massive act of genocide in the history of the world” (Stannard, 1992, p. x). The historic downplaying, and even moral justification, of this foundational feat of mass murder would repay study for what it reveals about Herrenvolk theory.

Similarly, the distortions about Africa’s past need to be contextualized not as contingently racist descriptions by individual bigots, but as an organic part of the project of denying African personhood. Correspondingly, we need to research and valorize the long “vindicationist” tradition in the Pan-Africanist movement, locating it as a crucial part of the

intellectual political struggle against the system of global white supremacy (Campbell, 1987).

- (ii) **Language and Culture:** The colonized have often argued that the languages of the Mother Countries are not neutral, but to a significant extent the carriers of imperial culture. For this reason, the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o no longer writes in English, choosing instead to write in his native Gikuyu (Wa Thiong'o, 1986). In the Caribbean, where creoles of various kinds have developed, part of the resistance to white racism has simply been the affirmation of the worth of these languages, from the work of J.J. Thomas (1869) onwards. But it might also be illuminating to examine them for evidence of conceptual opposition to dominant semantics, alternate categorizations of reality that to a certain extent challenge existing frameworks—an "antilanguage" appropriate for an "antisociety" (Alleyne, 1988, ch. 6). And if not here, in the creole languages which developed more or less spontaneously, then certainly in the self-consciously created "dread talk" of the Rastafari (Pollard, 1994).
- (iii) **"Raced"/Third World Epistemology:** Mainstream liberal political theory has seldom been epistemologically self-conscious, taking for granted the universal perceptiveness of the abstract Enlightenment cognizer. The challenge of Marxism was seen in part as the attempt to develop a radical theory from the putatively epistemically privileged position (with respect to possibilities for differential experience, alternative conceptualization) of the proletariat. Contemporary feminism has adopted and adapted this notion in the form of so-called "feminist standpoint theory," perhaps the most influential version of "feminist epistemology".

A plausible case can surely be made, then, that a racially-informed/"black"/"Third World" epistemology can be developed as part of this political project, an epistemology that would self-consciously take the standpoint of those racially-subordinated by the system of white supremacy as a source of conceptual inspiration and experiential guidance. This would recognize that there is such a thing as a "black" experience and perspective on reality while simultaneously, through its social-structural rather than biologicistic conceptualization, repudiating the mystifications of contemporary "melanin theory" (Mills, 1988).
- (iv) **The Body:** In the racial polity, by contrast with the colourless polity of abstract Western theory, the body necessarily itself

becomes politicized, giving rise to a "body politics". White supremacy subordinates the body as the indicator of diminished personhood, a subordination manifested both in the derogation of the nonwhite body (Russell et al, 1992) and, especially during the regimen of slavery, the impositions of certain postures, body-languages.

What form has resistance to these negative valorizations and these carnal impositions taken? Within the region, Rastafari is perhaps the most striking case of the deliberate transformation of the black body, and its revisionist re-inscription into an alternative narrative of captive warriors in Babylon. The very fact that the flashing locks of the strutting dread are now a media cliché is a remarkable testimony to the transformation of the rules of the somatic space of the *Herrenvolk* polity. Within this expanded vision of the subject-matter appropriately to be investigated by political philosophy, an evolving phenomenology of the black body would no longer seem out of place, being clearly tied in with the contested carnalities of politicized personhood. In addition, popular dance could be scrutinized for signs of re-inventions of the postures of the body, micro-politics of assertion, stiffenings of the spine, against the imposed deferentiality required of sub-persons.

- (v) **Folk Religions:** This new framework would also imply the explicit political recognition of folk religion—vodun, santería, obeah, Rastafari, candomble—as a primary locus of resistance to the ideology and practice of the regime of white supremacy. (Indeed this recognition is, ironically, more clearly manifested in the suppressive policies of colonial governments towards these religions than in academic intellectual theorizing itself.) The crucial role black religion historically played in slave uprisings is, of course, well known, but even well into the post-Emancipation period these religions have continued to be important as oppositional sites. The church, or the informal meeting-place, has functioned as an epistemological fortress, a place where the community could freely meet away from the white gaze and collectively synthesize insights to forge a countervailing ideology. It has served as a source of spiritual strength reinforcing conceptions of self-worth within an alternative narrative, a different cosmology, in defiance of the official status of sub-personhood (Murphy, 1994). And in some cases, as discussed in the previous section, it has arguably contributed through the rituals of song, dance and spirit possession to the generation

of oppositional physicalities, the rebuilding of an alternative self differently related to its material body.

- (vi) **Intersection with Gender:** Finally, all of these would need to be examined in connection with the intersecting system of gender domination, which necessarily shapes both the structures of oppression and the patterns of resistance (Mohanty et al, 1991). The valorization of pre-colonial tradition against European erasures, for example, may foster an uncritical embrace of a past remembered less fondly by women assigned to traditional roles, so that a double re-thinking may be necessary. The male assertion of personhood in a sexist society becomes the assertion of **manhood** against **emasculation**, a “manhood” which is itself likely to be at least partially conceptually conflated with a certain positioning over subordinated women. Sexuality and sexual relations will necessarily be racialized in a white-supremacist order, involving the privileging of certain somatotypes in a hierarchy of desirability and prestige (Fanon, 1952; Hernton, 1966). Thus nonwhite women will in general be engaged in a politics of both trans-gender unity and inter-gender division, fighting on shifting fronts that are both racial and sexual (Collins, 1991; Reddock, 1993).

CONCLUSION

The idea, then, would be for black philosophers in political theory—or rather all philosophers interested in the elimination of racism, and in bringing mainstream philosophy down from its otherworldly empyrean musings—to take global white supremacy as a political system, and begin to map its contours. An interdisciplinary approach will obviously be called for, in which one moves back and forth across the boundaries of formal philosophy, drawing on recent work in cultural studies, “critical race theory,” and socio-economic research, to keep the abstractions in touch with empirical reality. (Abstraction itself is not the problem, but an idealizing abstraction which abstracts away from crucial determinants. No serious theorizing is possible without abstraction.)

There is nothing new in the observation that for the past several hundred years, race and racism have been central to the histories of the Caribbean region in particular and the West in general. But the profound implications of this fact for the catego-

ries and explanatory schemas of mainstream Western political philosophy have not properly been worked out. In effect, Anglo-American theory needs to catch up with what has always been perceived by the racially subordinated in the West: that the local intra-European ontology was never the general one, and that the revision in both theory and practice of the actual *Herrenvolk* ontology has always been as worthily "philosophical" an enterprise as any of the preoccupations of orthodox textbook white theory.

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